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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

NEA/PD FOR FRANK FINVER

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TAGS: PTER PGOV KPAO KMDR OPRC EG

SUBJECT: SENIOR EDITOR PRAISES PRESIDENT BUSH'S SIGNING
CONDOLENCE BOOK FOR SHARM VICTIMS

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

Summary

¶11. (U) The new editor-in-chief of the very influential pro-government news weekly Al Ahram Al Arabi (circulation: 80,000) had high praise for President Bush's signing the condolence book for victims of the Sharm bombings, at the Egyptian Embassy. (A color photograph of the same appeared on the front page of Al Ahram on July 26.) He said that this was reassuring to the Egyptian people and the government of Egypt, and indicated he felt that this, and the recent condolence remarks by Secretary Rice and clarifications by Deputy Secretary Zoellick on the U.S. position on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in elections, were perceived as a "welcome move away from the confrontational style" that had developed in the bilateral relationship ever since the arrest of opposition political party leader Ayman Nour. He said he hoped that the momentum of President Bush's gesture would be sustained, perhaps through the visit of a high-level U.S. official to Sharm El Sheikh in the near future to express solidarity with the people of Egypt, and perhaps even to attend a conference on terrorism. End summary.

Dr. Abdul Atti Muhammad -- some background information.

¶12. (U) The Public Affairs Counselor and Information Officer paid a courtesy call on Dr. Abdul Atti Muhammad, the new editor-in-chief of Al Ahram Al Arabi (circulation: 80,000), the influential weekly news "magazine" of the mainstay, pro-government daily of record, Al Ahram newspaper (circulation 800,000). Dr. Abdul Atti is one of several new directors of Egyptian media organizations announced by the Shoura Council two weeks ago in a shake-up of the top level of the official Egyptian media establishment, and is well known to us as a respected Al Ahram columnist whose views are regarded as "independent" but not particularly critical of the ruling National Democratic Party or of the United States. Dr. Abdul Atti wrote his doctoral dissertation on Islamic fundamentalism.

President Bush's signing of condolence book was a welcome gesture of support for Mubarak; seen as antidote to recent tensions over political liberalization.

¶13. (SBU) The Embassy officers began by expressing their condolences for the Sharm El Sheikh bombings of July 23, which prompted Dr. Abdul Atti to refer to that day's (July 26) edition of Al Ahram newspaper, the front page of which bore an above-the-fold color photograph of President and Mrs. Bush signing the condolence book for victims of the Sharm bombings, at the Egyptian Embassy in Washington. Abdul Atti said this gesture was deeply appreciated by the Egyptian people and government. Elaborating further, he mentioned that, in his view, Egyptian-American relations had been strained for many months, especially since the arrest of Ayman Nour, because the U.S. administration seemed to be giving Egypt "mixed signals" (i.e., had been critical) about the direction it should take towards political liberalization. He indicated that President Bush's public gesture of sympathy for the victims of the Sharm bombings was an excellent sign that the bilateral relationship might have weathered the rough spell, and that relations were on the mend. He added that he hoped that a high-level USG official might be able to build on this momentum by visiting Egypt, particularly Sharm El Sheikh, in the near future, perhaps as part of symposium to discuss terrorism, or in some other way demonstrating solidarity with Egypt in the fight against terrorism. Emboffs mentioned that the nomination of the new Ambassador to Egypt had been announced only yesterday.

Abdul Atti claims Secretary Rice's address at AUC had left

room for misunderstanding about U.S. stance on Islamist parties' participation; Deputy Secretary Zoellick's recent news conference in Cairo clarified the point.

14. (SBU) Abdul Atti went on to say that he thought all of the U.S. emphasis on "democracy" had made the top leadership of Egypt feel "let down" by the administration, and stressed that President Mubarak needed America to demonstrate its support for his government in a way that would make it clear to "the street" that America was solidly behind him. "The Egyptian regime is fragile," Abdul Atti said, "and this fragility has been exacerbated by a series of U.S. statements that 'openly' criticize it." He averred that Secretary Rice, in her address at the American University in Cairo, had left room for Egyptians to believe that the U.S. would not be opposed to a government that included the religious parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and that this had given Islamists a green light to agitate against the regime. Secretary Rice's mentioning to Foreign Minister Aboul-Gheit, during his Washington visit, that Ghad party leader Ayman Nour should be released from detention had also undermined the image of the regime on the street, and was therefore an encouragement to Islamists, he said. He did agree, however, that Deputy Secretary Zoellick's statements at a recent Embassy-organized press conference in Cairo emphasizing that participation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the upcoming elections was an issue that Egyptians had to resolve themselves, and was not an American "demand," had been encouraging.

A bit of hyperbole: "linking" American pressure on democracy to Sharm bombings.

15. (SBU) Abdul Atti linked American "pressure about political reform" to the Sharm bombings by saying it had weakened the prestige of the regime to the point that terrorists had been emboldened to attack it openly. Spreading the blame more widely (and realistically), he added that the actions of the Ministry of Interior after the Taba bombings last March were also to blame for the Sharm bombings. The security forces had rounded up bedouin indiscriminately, he said, and had treated them miserably. He surmised that in retribution, some Sinai bedouin had given the perpetrators of the bombings assistance by providing a safe haven in the mountains surrounding the summer resort of Sharm El Sheikh.

Appeal for more signs of support from high-level U.S. officials.

16. (SBU) The conversation concluded with the new editor appealing for more "indications of support" for the NDP government from the United States, even if that support was symbolic, and that it be sustained, and not just be a "one-off" event such as the President's condolence book signing. Referring to Secretary Rice's recent statement of condolence to victims of the Sharm bombings, which had been distributed as press release by the Embassy and carried in all papers, he mentioned that Egyptians greatly appreciated her referring to Egypt as a "friend and ally". "This and the U.S. President's signing the condolence book are wonderful gestures of support," Abdul Atti repeated, "but a timely visit to Sharm by the Secretary of State or another high-level USG official would be even better." It would give needed encouragement to President Mubarak, who, the editor said, is "working alone and would welcome a convincing demonstration of American support."

JONES